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## THE STUDY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

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JOHN E. COLBURN

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I am glad to be here and to speak here on English literature; for I am consumed with enthusiasm for the subject, and am so far a monomaniac that I sincerely believe that, in actual importance, as bearing on that supreme end of teaching, the making of a man, there is no other study which equals this, or even distantly approaches it. I do sincerely believe that if, in some impossible situation, one were forbidden to teach every other conceivable thing, he might nevertheless build up a very respectable culture, and minister to the formation of characters practical as well as beautiful; in short, that he might make men and women, with this alone.

Now, literature is indispensable, first, as a means enabling one to understand and use language; and such ability is rare. I speak advisedly when I say that even among intelligent pupils, coming from fairly cultured homes, it is not safe to count on complete and accurate knowledge of the meaning of even the very common words. And it is not only true that pupils are often unable to express themselves completely and with accuracy, but that what they do say very frequently means the diametrical opposite of what was intended. Pupils, I say; but the same thing is true of grown people. Many people—dare we say most?—get the ideas contained in language as a nearsighted man gets the view of a mountain: the broad outline is there; there is a blur of color of more or less definite shape; but all the fine detail and sharpness of line is wanting. Just so people get from language, frequently, a kind of mass of idea, which is, in a general way, the idea intended, but includes and excludes much which should be left out or contained.

Matthew Arnold speaks of words thrown out at a great idea which they are intended to indicate, not to express. That may do for the

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Conference of the Secondary Schools of Vermont with the University of Vermont, January 11-12, 1906.

*great* idea, because it *cannot* be expressed; but certainly not for the little idea—the common thought of everyday life—because it can be easily and completely expressed. And yet I think that most people—yes, let us be humble and say most of us—throw words at ideas as carelessly as one throws bones to a dog.

Now, what is the remedy for all this? The dictionary and the grammar? Why, yes. But we cannot too soon get the idea that the dictionary and the grammar are not the court of last appeal. It is men like Shakespeare and Byron and Tennyson who have thrust out their hands into the chaos to fashion forth a language. Webster did not create it, nor Sara Arnold. What they have done is to follow humbly in the footsteps of the creators and tell what *they* did. Their sole value is in the completeness with which they have submerged themselves, and in the accuracy with which they have reported what great writers have done. An appeal to either of them as against a great author is like an appeal to Isaac Newton as against the Almighty. I am aware that Scott made blunders, but we do not appeal to the grammarians to prove that; but *through* them we bring him to trial before a jury of his peers—the other divinities of the literary pantheon.

It may be true that these justices of the peace are of sufficient authority to try *our* small cases; but why not after all appeal to the real fountain-head of authority? It is more important that we should *feel* a blunder than that we should be able to define it. The latter follows the former and is meaningless without it. Is it not true that many people who could parse Young's "Night Thoughts" without turning a hair, do nevertheless habitually and constantly speak ungrammatically without knowing it, and hear others do the same thing without preceiving it?

Again, a definition is a poor introduction when one wants to become acquainted with a word. One must live with a word, and meet it over and over again, to know it. Of two words with the same definition there is always one right and one wrong, and I do not see how either dictionary or grammar is to help us here. Correct speech, and fluent and accurate speech, are not the result of a conscious application of rules and definitions, but of a *feeling* for the right thing—an unconscious habit of right utterance.

If I wanted to learn Spanish, I should try to get into a Spanish

family. I should use textbooks and a dictionary, but I should depend upon conversation for all real, practical knowledge of Spanish. Just so of English; the way to learn it is to *live* with the masters of it. And that means, read. Read the best if you can; but if not, the next best; and if not that, the next best; but *read!*

And then again do but consider the value of literature in its relations to other studies—history, for example. I tell you that Alexander and Napoleon, treated from the purely historical standpoint, are tin soldiers in a box. It is only as history partakes of the literary quality or is embodied in the novel that these dead things spring into life and become real. And so of the whole range of human knowledge. It is without form and void, and darkness broods upon the face of it, until some master of literature touches it with his enchanted wand and says: "Let there be light."

But above this whole imparting of correctness and fluency and accuracy, above even the ministry of knowledge, lies the other ministry of joy; and nowhere else can we find so full a measure of joy at so cheap a rate. It is the port of refuge from the irritations and trivialities of life. It is the new world wherein all that was impossible in the old becomes suddenly attainable. It is the sudden flowering of a thousand new senses. It is the opening of the prison to them that are bound, and the giving of sight to the blind; the unstopping of deaf ears, and the preaching of the gospel to the poor.

Now, I have said so much as to the importance of literature, not because I believed that anyone doubted that it was important, but that I fear that many of us do not realize how *overwhelmingly* important it is. And I have contrasted it with grammar, not because I despise that study; for it cannot be too emphatically stated that *no* student is getting too much grammar, and only here and there is one getting enough. But you recall how Hans Andersen's tinder-box soldier filled his pockets with coppers in the first chamber, and then threw them all away for the silver in the next, and this for the gold in the third. It is not that either is of no consequence, but that the *relative* significance of literature is so very great.

And when we say "literature," let us be sure that we mean just that. For one chief reason why, perhaps, the teaching of literature has meant less to us than it might have done is that we have been

teaching the lives of authors and the histories of their works, or that we have been driving our pupils to study with equal care all the hundred pages of a book wherein ten pages contained the masterpiece, and ninety the notes and comments of men who, to say the least of it, are not great geniuses. Do you know that, with all our multiplication of Sunday schools, they say that real knowledge of the Scriptures is on the wane? And would you like to know the reason? It is because we have ten mighty lines of the old seers and prophets, and then try to force sensible people to imbibe the lukewarm and diluted drivel of commentators. We study everything else *but* the Bible.

Do you know that, with all our multiplication of classes in literature, they say that the habit of good reading is on the wane? And would you like to know the reason? It is, so far as we are responsible for it at all, because it is possible for the student to get through those same classes with a pretty fair notion of the development of the drama, and a knowledge of the facts in the life of this author and that, but without acquiring even a speaking acquaintance with literature itself. To my way of thinking, the man of all the literary men of England whose *life* is best worth study is Dr. Samuel Johnson; and if he ever wrote anything which is enjoyable reading, I have yet to discover it.

Have you ever stopped to think how many of the world's great masterpieces are without authors? How many of the greatest authors are without biographers? Who wrote Job? What life did Homer lead? We do not know. But—and this is the point—if we did, it would not add one particle of beauty to a single line of either of those two most splendid poems. Not that we should not give worlds to know, but that the man who should exchange a line of Homer's poems for the whole story of his life would be filling his pockets with coppers, and throwing away fine gold.

Shakespeare bought certain lands and houses, and sued certain men at law; and those facts are precisely as valuable as the fact that Mr. So-and-so bought such-and-such a farm yesterday, or had a lawsuit with Mr. What-you-may-call-him—no less and no more. Shakespeare's life had so infinitesimally little to do with his works that absolutely not one single shred of authentic biography can be constructed from the whole range of what he wrote. But his works

have had so much to do with the life of every man that whoever has written Shakespeare's biography has become convinced that Shakespeare was of his own profession. *Anything* can be proved from his writings—even that there was no Shakespeare at all. But *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and *The Merchant of Venice* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, remain, whether Shakespeare went to Italy or never left England; whether he studied law or held horses outside the Globe; whether he and Anne Hathaway lived in a state of conjugal felicity or quarreled like Kilkenny cats. And whichever theory is true—or if the very name of Shakespeare should pass into oblivion—so long as these remain, we shall have little to regret.

How spake the oracle? Care for no name at all,  
Say but just this: we praise one helpful whom we call  
The holder of the plough-share, the great *deed* ne'er grows small,  
Not the great *name*.

But let us guard at every turn against the fallacy of supposing that, because a thing is *relatively* unimportant, it is absolutely so. The history of literature is a valuable and illuminating study, if only it is made ancillary to the study of literature itself; but it cannot be too often and too loudly reiterated that it is useless to study *about* things, of which in themselves one knows nothing. It cannot be too often reiterated that the duty of us teachers is to *saturate* our boys and girls with good literature. It is our duty to begin with the day they enter school, and not to leave off until they have walked down from the graduation platform; by reading to them, by getting them to read, by recommending amusing and inspiring books, by any and all means familiarizing them with the widest possible range of good literature; for the end and object of literature reading is not to impart knowledge of a prescribed group of facts, but to make readers.

And, in order that we may do that, it is needful that we look well to the methods which we employ in making our pupils acquainted with books. The one supremely important question for any teacher of literature has nothing to do with the number of questions which his pupils may be able to answer or not to answer. On the contrary, if any teacher finds it possible to make out twenty questions on English literature the answers to which shall be an accurate measure of his pupils' work, so that he shall be able to mark them on the scale of 100,

he can make up his mind pretty conclusively that his work along that line does not amount to much. I want to repeat that, just so far as the results of a course in English literature are capable of definite and accurate measurement, they are comparatively worthless; because it is precisely the things which *cannot* be measured which should be aimed at.

It is appreciation, it is enjoyment, it is love, that are the important things here. It is the power to imbue oneself with the author's spirit, and to take up one's abode unreservedly in his world, that counts.

Now, then, I do not believe that we are gaining much in endeavoring to train pupils to approach books in a critical spirit. There is such a thing as too much sophistication in reading, and above the gateway of the readers' paradise is written large: "Except ye become as little children ye shall in no wise enter." If I may be allowed a personal reference, I know that whatever little appreciation and discernment I have ever acquired—and, whether wisely or unwisely, whether with discrimination or not, I know at least that I have wonderfully *loved* books—was derived, not from any careful study or analysis, but in my own home from the evening readings which always closed the day. They were wholly uncritical, but from them there grew up unconsciously a desire for the good and a rejection of the bad, not because there was any definite teaching, but because we enjoyed the good and did not enjoy the bad. That is the point: that is the test of success in teaching literature. Are the pupils enjoying what they read? O you people who are teaching books, do your pupils come up against your instruction as against a bounding wall beyond which they cannot pass, or is for them the opening *through* the wall into the "untraveled world whose margins fade forever and forever as they move?" Well, that will depend pretty largely, I suspect, on whether you are making them write out comparisons of the characters of Brutus and Cassius, or whether you are picking out the passages which are beautiful and fine, and getting your pupils somehow to see that they *are* beautiful and fine.

The problem which most of us Vermont teachers have to face is the problem of dealing with pupils as they come to us from the district school; and, as things are contrived in this state, that may mean almost anything or almost nothing. It is true that in the larger towns,

where there is something like a systematic gradation, some uniform and consistent course of instruction is possible, and, I believe, is in many instances more or less successfully attempted, so that pupils coming up through these grades may be supposed to possess some foundation of knowledge upon which to base instruction. But it is true that we can no longer count upon finding a body of books in the country home, or upon finding that the few which are there are intelligently read. And the very conditions under which the district school-teacher is compelled to teach preclude anything like adequate instruction in these lines. The chances are that she herself comes from just such a bookless home, has been trained in just such a district school, and, at best, has had one or two years in some sort of academy or normal school. I am aware that this condition is not by any means universal, but it is at least too common. It is too often the case that our district schools are places where inefficient teachers propagate their own ignorance, and where a long continuance on the pupil's part means simply an ever-deepening darkness. The needs of pupils coming from such schools are peculiar, and they are desperate. Such pupils need not to be made to know a few books to the bottom, because they *cannot* so know them. To know anything is to bring it into relations with other like things known. And the average pupil is in no condition so to relate new books, because he has no knowledge of old books to which to relate them. To criticise is to compare, and the average pupil is in no position to compare, because he has nothing in his mind with which to make a comparison.

Our business is to establish a basis for knowledge and a basis for criticism; to give him something to which to relate and with which to compare. And I am here to plead for much reading; much comparatively uncritical and even superficial reading, if you will, but *much* anyway, having for its aim enjoyment and the creation of a hunger for books, as opposed to a little intensive reading having for its aim the complete understanding of a few books.

We hear much about bringing our work to perfection and doing a few things well. And that is a noble principle, if we do not deceive ourselves by thinking that we have arrived at the polishing stage before the rough work is done. I am having a hard-wood floor laid in my library, and I do assure you that I am not going to begin by var-

nishing the first board as soon as it is laid. I am going to wait until the floor is all laid and then put on the polish.

I have known pupils to come through all the grades of a fairly good school, and from fairly good homes at that, who arrived in the class in English literature without having read one single novel of Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, or George Eliot. My business was to get down something for them to stand on as soon as possible, and not to keep them tottering above the abyss on *The Merchant of Venice* or any other single plank, until they had succeeded in putting a piano finish on it. The difficulty is that we are applying too early a method of study which is adapted only for classes already acquainted with a widely diversified body of literature. We do not teach nearly enough literature, but what little we do teach we teach too much.

In conclusion, I should like to submit a few propositions and to call attention to a few false assumptions which, I believe, have had much to do with our methods of teaching:

## PROPOSITIONS

- I. The basis of all real criticism must be a wide acquaintance with literature.
- II. The pupils in our high schools do not possess the critical faculty in any high degree, nor is it ready as yet for development.
- III. The pupil does possess the power to appreciate the highest forms of literature if properly presented.

## FALSE ASSUMPTIONS

- I. That the pupil has such an acquaintance.
- II. That the pupil has a power of original criticism larger than he actually possesses.
- III. That much literature is above the power of the pupil to appreciate.

## CONCLUSION

The method of teaching literature should appeal to the appreciative rather than to the critical faculties of the child, and should include much and widely diversified reading, of the best literature.

## IV. The ends of teaching are:

- a) To show the pupil how language is used by the best men.
- b) To create a taste for literature, i. e., to make the pupil love to read good books.
- c) As a means to the former end, to enable the pupil to tell a good book from a bad one, and to distinguish the good things in books.

## V. These ends are better secured by an extensive course of uncritical reading having for its special object the creation of an appreciation, than by a narrow

course of analytical criticism having for its special object the complete understanding of a few books.

- VI. Analytical criticism has its place as an occasional complement to the other, but only where the pupil has already a sufficient knowledge of literature to constitute a basis for criticism.

## DISCUSSION

MAX W. ANDREWS, University of Vermont: The purpose of the remarks which follow is to bring into the discussion a plea for more comprehensive study of American literature. For this reason I leave to others the consideration of specific points in Mr. Colburn's paper, and hope that the discussion will include this additional phase of the subject.

In recent years there has been awakened a great and growing interest in American affairs, and in the history and significance of American writings. Many excellent works have contributed to the more complete understanding of this subject. Moreover, in many respects literature has come to be recognized as the most important branch in any course of instruction; that is, literature, not biography. Aside from its great value as an aid in developing a good style in composition, literature must be recognized as a medium for influencing national life.

To be sure, the study of English literature is often taken to include a few of the most important productions of this country. The student—following the college-entrance requirements—does study a few of the masterpieces of our literature. This is good as far as it goes; but does it go far enough? Isn't it worth while for the high-school student to have a good, broad knowledge and appreciation of the whole outline, at least, of our own national literature? Surely, we have much that is worthy of careful study. But someone may say that of truly great literature we have produced little; so much the more reason why that little should be perfectly familiar to all. Let us admit the dependence of this literature upon that of England at successive stages of literary history. That will make the process of its evolution from "colonial polemics and revolutionary politics" to the position of literary independence an interesting and profitable study.

However, it is not my purpose to argue, but to state a few facts. This is the situation as I see it: In the first place, a great many students in the secondary schools will never go to college, where they would have opportunity and incentive to become more familiar with our literature. For that reason it seems to me that they should be taught as much as possible about the early attempts at literary productions in this country, and about the various reasons why more of merit was not produced in early times. It ought to be an essential part of any American citizen's education to be thoroughly familiar with the works of all the great men who have helped to make our literature what it is.

Now let us turn the attention to those who do go to college. Is their condition much different? Take circumstances as they exist here at "Vermont;" for of them I can speak without much fear of misstatement. Of those who enter col-

lege each year only about one-fifth are enrolled in the arts courses. The others pursue courses of study in one branch or another of science. These students in the scientific courses are required to do work in English during the first two years. The work of the first year is composition and rhetoric, with a little study of the language and its history. In the second year the work consists of a more advanced course, comprising rhetorical analysis, composition, and principles of literary criticism, to which is added a one-hour course of English literature. On account of lack of time, however, this one-hour course is not required of the students in all of the scientific courses. Therefore these students are in the same condition with respect to American literature as those who never go to college, because in the last two years of the scientific courses there is very little time, and less inclination, for the election of literary subjects.

The conditions are somewhat different in the department of arts. There is opportunity to elect various courses of literature, and it is very gratifying to note that American literature comes in for its fair share of election. But that share is only a very small part of the whole number of students in any class. All the others go on to their life's work without further thought or care for the study of our national literature.

Probably the most serious difficulty, for those who feel the need of a more extended course of this kind in the preparatory schools, is the question of time. There is no place left in the curriculum for the subject. Then why not make use of the modern methods of correlation and devise a plan whereby a considerable amount of literature study might be combined with other work—realizing all the time, as Mr. Colburn said, that the student should be saturated with the literature, that his study should be appreciative rather than analytical and critical?

There are one or two evident ways of combining American literature with other subjects. One is to give it in connection with the rhetoric. This, I know, has been done with marked success. Another plan is to combine it with the study of United States history. Indeed, since history forms the environment for literature, should they not be studied together? Moreover, the literature of any country and of any period is sure to reflect the life—private, social, and political—and in its turn to be much affected by the conditions of life. Perhaps it might be still better to combine the two schemes, teaching the appreciative study of literature, as literature, with the rhetoric, and the biographical and historical study with the history. If, then, we admit that "literature is the lasting expression in words of the meaning of life," is not our literature worthy of careful study, both for itself and for the aid it may afford in better understanding our history and our social conditions?

At present we realize that literature cannot be taught. It used to be taught, but now it is learned—learned by reading it and studying it, not by reading and studying about it. However, we certainly feel that the student should learn something about the political events of the author's day, what were the social and religious, what the prevailing literary characteristics of the era to which he belonged.

All this is certainly worth a great deal when applied to the literature of this country.

Not to satisfy, but to stimulate, is the ideal. If the study of a piece of literature is pursued in the proper spirit, it will awaken in the student a desire for a further knowledge of the author's works. It has been said that if one goes to the library and takes down a complete edition, he may open the book at some juvenile work, or at something which is difficult in style, or remote from his experience, and therefore uninteresting. He is disappointed, and perhaps fails to find the beauty or the inspiration that awaits him, simply for want of proper direction. To give this direction is the aim, and at the same time the justification, of the more extended study of American literature.

EDWARD D. COLLINS, principal of the Johnson Normal School, Johnson, Vt.: It would be a pleasanter function to express hearty approval of the manner in which the topic has been presented than to attempt criticism. But as the duty of one taking part in a discussion is to criticise as well as to approve, I will be in one or two respects critical of positions taken by the first paper, if you will remember that I am in general in hearty sympathy with its gospel of promoting the extensive reading of the best books.

I do not think that I would say that this subject, "The Study of English Literature," is supreme. I do not think that I would say that of any subject in the curriculum. I do not think that we gain by overestimating the importance of our topic. If there is a predominant issue, it is, I think, the integration of the different subjects into a well-ordered whole, which would be the ideal curriculum, rather than to establish the supremacy of any one over the rest. It is a matter of pedagogy, really; and our knowledge of the child should teach us what reasonably to expect from this, as from any other subject of study. Every teacher who studies pupils as much as books knows that the pupils of any school fall into several pretty clearly differentiated groups as respects their mental habits in regard to the receptivity of material.

There is the child who learns to do by doing, whose receptivity is actually increased by expressing himself; in other words, the motor-minded child. Then there is the eye-minded child, the one who absorbs books, who gains his fulness by reading; and most of us, I suppose, are eye-minded. We have had between four and five centuries of the printing press to make us so. We over-work our sense of sight at the expense of the other senses. Even our sub-conscious states testify to this; for we do not dream of hearing sounds or of smelling odors or of tasting things with anything like the frequency that we dream of seeing things. We are, most of us, eye-minded. But there is the student who is ear-minded, whose interest is roused and attention focused by narration, and whose memory, therefore, fastens with its surest grasp upon the tale that is told. Without exemplifying further, I think that I am justified in saying that we ought not to expect any subject to make the same appeal to these three classes of pupils. We ought to expect to find some children who are literary-minded, to use a new expression, and some who are not.

The influence of the study of English literature, by whatever method, seems to me to be not so tangible as to be susceptible of ready measurement; and the case is not helped one whit if we cut loose from method altogether. The individual cases cited in last evening's most interesting lecture, of literary geniuses who had been stimulated by indiscriminate browsing in what was certainly remarkably good literary pasturage, do not seem to me to offer criteria for a fundamental principle. In the absence of data necessary to form any other judgment, we must expect to find that English literature, like every other subject which we teach, makes a strong appeal to certain students and a slight appeal to others. It is for us to find its proper relative evaluation, rather than to attempt to establish its supremacy over other subjects.

Having said this much in way of criticism, or dissent, let me hasten to add the weight of my testimony to what has been already said about the value of extensive reading of the best literature. Literature has been presented this morning essentially as an art study. I think you apprehend the sense in which I use the term "art study." I mean that literature is not pragmatic, not utilitarian; that it is a culture study in the same way that Latin and Greek are culture studies. Some of us who wished a few years ago to see the classics relegated to a subordinate place among our studies, expecting that English and the modern foreign tongues would more than fill their place, must confess that we see ourselves in danger of losing the new humanism before we have it.

In saying this, I have in mind the conditions prevailing in rural Vermont; not in Burlington or the large towns, but in the country village, which is more truly typical of the state—the village with its graded and high schools, its three or four churches representing as many different denominations, its woman's club or literary society, its public library, not infrequently the gift of some philanthropically intentioned individual, and its lecture or entertainment course, frequently on the wane. I am confident that I shall not be impeached by careful students of conditions in rural communities when I say that, in spite of these outward symbols of educational, religious, intellectual, social, and æsthetic activities, the standards of taste are low. I think it would be easy to prove it in respect to any one of the several activities which I have named, but I will not bore you by a demonstration. Perhaps I will illustrate in one or two particulars as I go on. If you will accept the statement as a matter of fact for the present, it will enable us to inquire the cause of the condition.

Of course, the condition is not due to any single cause; but if it is due to any one cause more than to any other, I believe that one is the waning influence of good literature, the decline in our standards of literary taste. Mr. Colburn has commented on the decline in popular familiarity with the Bible, in spite, or by reason, of so many commentaries and lesson-helps. Exactly the same thing is true of other books which formerly served as literary models. It seems strange that this can be said at a time when the rapid increase of public libraries would seem to indicate quite the reverse. But if we examine conditions, we see why it is true.

Mr. Carnegie did a beautiful thing in furnishing so many splendid housings for public libraries. He would have done a better thing if he could have insured that the best books only should find place upon the shelves; or if he could have provided that only wise and sympathetic librarians should guide and influence the young in the choice of their reading; or even if he could have given a guarantee that discriminating readers should form the membership of the future purchasing committees of these libraries. But he could not do that; and so we have the greater responsibility left with us at a time, unfortunately, when too many influences are operating against high standards of literary workmanship.

For we live in the midst of an unprecedented output of books—not literature, merely books. They pour forth in enormous editions. And our library purchasing committees, in their efforts to fill the empty shelves of their new libraries, run foul of this current stuff. The question too often is, not one of purchasing the greatest literary values to place upon the shelves, but one of purchasing the greatest number of books with a given sum of money. That means second-rate fiction twelve months old; for such can be purchased at a few cents per volume. These books wear out, to be sure, but the pity of it is that they satisfy the popular taste, and create a demand for more of the same kind or worse, so that we find our sets of Dickens and Scott the best preserved among the books of the library. We are cultivating readers whose taste detects no difference in literary flavor between *Letters of a Self-made Merchant to his Son* and Turgenev's masterly analysis and portrayal of the inevitable conflict between youth and age in *Fathers and Children*, and for whom nature reeking in the intense, highly charged, slangy atmosphere of the western story is more charming than that revealed in *The Return of the Native*. You observe that I cite my illustrations from modern literature. We must not lose sight of the fact that it is what is read most, and that what is read is not the best of modern literature.

Now, this decline of taste in reading is, I suppose, merely a part of what was embraced in President Buckham's remarks upon the decline of the educational leadership of Vermont. What have we lost by this particular part of it? Our grasp of truth, or of great elemental, fundamental forces? No, I think not. We can find truth in the blade of grass or the leaf—anywhere. We come as near great fundamental forces in science as in art, in geology as in literature. I take it that our loss is rather that idealizing element which makes for intellectual morality, for mental uprightness. We lose the power which comes from character-building literature.

When we have succeeded in cultivating the appreciation of the best; when we get students to read classic models because they love them best; when we find them choosing the wheat and rejecting the chaff because they have become critical, we shall find that we have gained not more an educational than a moral victory, because we shall find that we have raised the level of the whole moral tone of the community.

## THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE <sup>1</sup>

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The philologist or scientific student of language has had to bear the brunt of many attacks. In the eyes of not a few he has been guilty of opposing to a genuine comprehension of the spirit of literature, a coldly critical study of the letter. For the artistic, the literary, the philosophical, he has been accused of substituting a dull and mechanical specialism, blind and callous to everything without the range of its own narrow system and method. Hence his greatest foe has been the man of letters. In turn he has been assailed by Pope, Voltaire, Lessing, Sainte-Beuve. Pope, to whom painstaking scholarship was abhorrent, gaily scoffs at "the chase of a panting word through time and space." Even Browning, who regards his dead grammarian as "loftier than the world suspects, living and dying," declares that he disregarded the claims of the physical life and became "soul-hydropic with a sacred thirst." But the language worker has borne all this with a patient shrug, for sufferance is the badge of his tribe. He not only "settled *Holi's* business" and "properly based *Oun*," but, steadily persisting by methods that his enemies dubbed mole-like, he opened up the whole field of Anglo-Saxon literature, he sifted Chaucer's wheat from the chaff that surrounded it, he placed on a sound basis the chronology of Shakespeare—thus scoring triumph after triumph in hostile territory. He is at present laden with all the spoils of war.

The scientific study of English is a very new science indeed—scarcely a century old. It is true that at every stage of English speech there have not been lacking men who have approached their language with the scholar's passion. Partly with a view to training young men in the use of their native tongue, King Ælfred translated the

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Conference of the Secondary Schools of Vermont with the University of Vermont, January 11-12, 1906.

great books of his world. "We must make means," he says in his famous preface to the *Pastoral Care*, "that all the youth now in England of free men who have the wealth to be able to set themselves to it, be put to learning, while they are not of use for anything else, until the time when they can well read English writing." With much the same purpose—to kindle boys to a study of English—the great abbot, Ælfric, applied, in his *Grammar*, the rules of Donatus and Priscian, perhaps "a little scratched" to his own linguistic forms. And, wonder of wonders, there arises, two hundred years later, a writer in the strange motley of poetry, theology, and phonetics—Orm, the priest, with his device of indicating consistently throughout his dreary *Ormulum*, every short vowel in a closed syllable by doubling the succeeding consonant. It is a pity that we have no evidence to support the antiquary Camden's statement that the monks of Tavistock in Devon, before the dissolution of their monastery, not only revived the study of Saxon, but possessed a font of Saxon type and printed Saxon books. In the sixteenth century we are met by an interesting group of orthoëpists and spelling reformers, such as Cheke, Hart, and Bullokar—all men of high education and acute students of phonetics, but yet utterly unprepared to grapple with alphabetic problems. The next two centuries offer a long line of English scholars—antiquarians like Spelman, bibliographers like Wanley, grammarians like Hickes, and editors like Junius and Elstob.

But as yet there is no really scientific study of English. Etymology is still a matter of guesswork, as all word-hunts are based upon the assumption that Hebrew is the original of our speech. National pride, unchecked by doubts that knowledge brings, made astounding claims. In his *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence, etc.*, (1605), Verstegan, writing proudly of "the great antiquity of our ancient English tongue and of the propriety, worthiness, and amplitude thereof", submits with becoming gravity and deference the opinions of the learned Joannes Goropius Becanus and Abraham Ortelius that Anglo-Saxon was "the first and most ancient language of the world, yea, the same that Adam spake in paradise." Hardly less surprising is the ground idea of the eccentric Horne Tooke's *Diversions of Purley*, that all other parts of speech are derived from the verb. "The prep-

osition 'beneath,' " he informs us, "is compounded of the imperative 'be' and the noun 'neath,' which word 'neath' has slipped away from our language." What is "fowl" but the past participle of the verb "to fly," and "hand" but the participial form of *hentan*, "to take"? Also it is perfectly clear that "ale" is the third singular present of *ælan*, "to inflame". The best evidence, however, of eighteenth-century ignorance of the spelling, inflections, and vocabulary of early English lies in the controversy that was waged over the genuineness of the Rowley poems of Thomas Chatterton. The grotesque jumble of archaic words, brought together through the aid of Bailey's dictionary from widely different periods and dialects, the modern syntax and idioms, the spurious inflections ("its" for the possessive pronoun, instead of the old neuter form, "it" or "his," and "en" for the singular ending of the verb) could not deceive the merest tyro of today.

The new philology came from abroad—strangely enough from the old homes of the English race, Germany and Denmark. As soon as the great German scholar, Grimm, had discovered the law of consonantal changes that associates the Indo-European languages, accurate and fruitful study of our origins became possible. It was a Dane, Rask, who published, in 1817, the first modern Anglo-Saxon grammar; it was a Dane, Thorkelin, who first edited, in 1815, the great epic of the *Beowulf*. It was a German, Blume, who found, in 1822, at Vercelli in Italy, the famous manuscript of early English poetry. From the first the Germans have dominated and directed the scientific study of our language. Their seminars have been the training-schools of the most intensive and productive students of English philology; their periodicals (and only among them are found magazines, *Anglia* and *Englische Studien*, devoted exclusively to special research in English) teem with special contributions that advance—sometimes it is true almost imperceptibly—the knowledge of linguistics. Nearly fifty years ago George Perkins Marsh, of Burlington, wrote sadly in the first of his *Lectures on the English Language*:

For the present the American student must renounce the ambition of adding anything to the existing stores of knowledge respecting English philology, and content himself with the humbler and more selfish aim of appropriating and elaborating the material which more fortunate or better-trained European scholars have gathered or discovered.

Twenty years ago great English editors were voicing, somewhat bitterly, the same feeling. Mr. Sweet, in his *Second Middle-English Primer*, confesses that "he has not attempted to forestall the inevitable German, who, it is to be hoped, will some day give us a critical edition of Chaucer." To this Professor Skeat<sup>1</sup> adds with feigned humility:

Though I am perhaps to some extent, disqualified, as being merely a native of London, in which city Chaucer himself was born, I hope I may be pardoned the temerity of attempting something in this direction.

Of late all that has been changed or is rapidly changing. In both England and America the special study of English stands today on a sound basis in the higher institutions of learning. Even Mr. Churton Collins,<sup>2</sup> the sworn foe of philologists, admits that at Oxford nothing could be more satisfactory than the provisions made for the study of language. The first thing which strikes us is the competence and judgment displayed in the organization of the philological part of the course, and the confusion, inadequacy and flimsiness so conspicuous in the literary part.

From Oxford, too, emanates the *New English Dictionary*, which is so zealously promoting etymological research. In our own country the obstacles to the proper study of language, so sadly recognized by Mr. Marsh, have been forever swept away. Seminars, lectures, courses far more varied and extensive than any which Germany can now boast, libraries offering greater facilities to the student than those of Berlin and Munich, with their inadequate service and insufficient catalogues, and finally constant travel bringing within the reader's ken original manuscripts and first editions, have combined to strengthen and ripen our philological scholarship. "All can raise the flowers now, for all have got the seed."

So far I have dealt only with the place held by our science in modern scholarship. I must now speak somewhat more intensively of the scope of the historical study of our language. But in my discussion I am forbidden, both by limitations of time and by the design of this conference, to devote attention to three phases of the subject, each of which calls loudly for consideration: first, the general psychological and phonetic principles which dictate the growth and constant

<sup>1</sup> *Minor Poems of Chaucer*, 1888, Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> *Ephemeris Critica*, 1902, p. 55.

changes of any language; secondly, the chronological review of the stages of our linguistic development; and, thirdly, the weighing and testing of means and methods of instruction in the science of philology. Barring all these, I shall seek merely to answer this leading question, What is the practical value of this historical study, not to the specialist, but to the man of general culture? by triple testimony to its worth. Apart from its own intrinsic interest, the study of the history of the English language has the three-fold value of revealing to us the life of our past, of casting the strongest light upon the speech of our present, and of rendering possible a scholarly appreciation of our literature of past ages as well as of today.

First of all, then, our study has inestimable cultural value in opening for us pages of life undisclosed by formal history. The language of our earlier periods must be examined, not as a pathological subject but as a vital and full-blooded organism, portraying at every stage of its development the social status and progress of the English people. Words, viewed with microscopic regard, cease to be mere arbitrary symbols, and become historical documents of worth, pulsing with the intimate life of other ages. For illustrations of the value of such dissection and analysis of single words I have no time or space now, but must content myself with a cursory glance at four large periods in the history of the English nation. Mark how etymology supplements Cæsar and Tacitus in its disclosure of Germanic origins. From the words common to all the languages of our group it is an easy matter to deduce the vocabulary of the common parent of them all, the prehistoric, proto-Germanic speech; and, as words are but signs of this or that phase of life and manners, we may readily, by a second step, discover the conditions of our primitive and half-savage ancestors, before they began to part on their wanderings. We know that they sailed their ships on neighboring oceans; that from their metals they fashioned implements and weapons; that they had learned to grow barley and oats and rye; that they carved their runic letters on trees and stones; and that they had a clear conception, not only of family relations, but of tribal government. Advancing now to the Anglo-Saxon period, let us observe how the most vital of historical movements, the introduction of Christianity, wrote itself large in the vocabulary of the people. The secular and monastic clergy, ecclesi-

astical dress and buildings and revenues, holy times and seasons, divine services, and, higher than these, various religious conceptions, and philosophical notions of God and his church, are all revealed to us through the etymological researches of scholars. What a wealth of ecclesiastical history lies hidden in the words "gospel," "bishop," "priest," "deacon," "monk," "anchorite!"

The effect of foreign ascendancy upon English life can be best studied in the new dialect that arose from unconscious compromise between the Anglo-Saxon speech and the vocabulary of the French invader. Says Wamba in *Ivanhoe*:

Swine is good Saxon, and pork, I think, is good Norman French, and so when the brute lives and is in the charge of a Saxon slave, she goes by her Saxon name; but becomes a Norman, and is called pork, when she is carried to the castle-hall to feast among the nobles. . . . Nay, I can tell you more. There is old Alderman Ox continues to hold his Saxon epithet, while he is under the charge of serfs and bondsmen, but becomes Beef, a fiery French gallant, when he arrives before the worshipful jaws that are destined to consume him. Mynheer Calf, too, becomes Monsieur de Veau in the like manner; he is Saxon, when he requires tendance, and takes a Norman name when he becomes a matter of enjoyment.

And so, French titles and terms of law and government, French phrases of war, French names for the arts and sciences, French words of "the chase" and other sports, speak more eloquently than chronicler or priest of England's subjugation.

The story of the "Revival of Learning" and the consequent influence of classical culture is told not only in the translations of Seneca or Plautus, in the vogue of epic or pastoral, in the slavish allegiance to Plato and Aristotle, but far more emphatically in the wholesale borrowing of learned words from the Latin language. The vocabulary of the Tudor and Early Stuart time, with its "long-tailed words in -osity and -ation," is an infinitely better index to the pedantry of that age than *The Governour* of Elyot or *The Schoolmaster* of Roger Ascham. Before the reaction came, which restored the equilibrium between the native and classical elements in our tongue, the speech, like that of Hudibras, seemed often

A Babylonish dialect,  
Which learned pedants much affect.  
It was a parti-colored dress

Of patched and piebald languages;  
 'Twas English cut on Greek and Latin  
 Like fustian heretofore on satin.

Thus does etymology impart the tone and temper of every age.

Not less important than the knowledge of the life of the past is the intimate acquaintance with the woof and texture of our present language, which may be derived only from a painstaking study of origins. Conversely, if I may trust my experience as a teacher, old sounds, old words, old forms and modes of speech, seem to the young student but lifeless things unless he at once detect their family likeness to expressions now in full life and being. It is my present purpose to point out a very few phases of this hereditary relation, which, though far more real, is not always as suspiciously obvious as the striking resemblance between the Stuart kings, Banquo's descendants, in the long gallery at Holyrood. I shall select examples from the four fields of phonology, etymology, accident and syntax. To illustrate the development of sounds, let us take two lines from Chaucer's Prologue.

And smale fowles māken melodye  
 That slēpen al the niȝht with open ye.

In the case of one or two of these words both spelling and pronunciation have altered since the fourteenth century. The final *e* in "smale" ("small") became silent and then disappeared; the open *ē* in "slēpen" ("sleep") was often written *ee*, and, as late as the eighteenth century, changed to the present sound of *i* (in "machine"); "ye" ("eye") has altered both in form and in sound, though in one manuscript it has the modern spelling. But "fowles," "maken," and "night," though totally unlike our present words in sound, are similar in appearance. We have retained the written word and altered the spoken, thus frankly coupling the sign of an earlier and the sound of a later period. So our spelling, obviously anachronistic though it is, has great historical interest.

Now let us cull one or two modern instances from our English vocabulary—you will find a thousand in such a book as Greenough and Kittredge's *Words and Their Ways in English Speech*. The two forms "isle" and "island" might well be supposed to be of common origin; but the first is derived from O. F. *isle* (Lat. *insula*), and the

second from A.-S. *ea-land* or *ig-land* ("water-land"). "Sound," a body of water, is derived from A.-S. *sund*; "sound," a noise, indirectly through the French from Lat. *son-us*. "Wilderness" is "the haunt of the wild deer (animals)," and "dandelion" the *dent de lion* or "lion's tooth." Only by historical study can we combat the dangers of popular etymology. As Professor Kittredge points out, "belfry" is not from "bell," but from O. F. *berfray*, "place of safety;" "crawfish" is from O. F. *crevice* (mod. *écrevisse*); and "touchy," not from "touch," but from "techy," "peevish." Everyone will recall Carlyle's famous derivation of "king," which is really "the man of the kin," from *könning* or *canning*, "able-man."

It is, however, in accident, in the inflections of words, that the past of a language can impart the most valuable lessons to the present. Only by the study of Anglo-Saxon grammar do we recognize the phonetic agencies that have molded the forms of our speech. I have space for a few illustrations. By a study of the Germanic originals of our declensions and conjugations we perceive first that umlaut or mutation has played as potent, if less obvious, a part among our vowels as among those of High German—that such changes in form as *man—men*, *long—length*, *whole—heel*, *foot—feet*, *blood—bleed*, *full—fill*, *mouse—mice*, *old—elder*, are due entirely to just such regressive influence of a following *i*-vowel, now lost, as we find in our present pronunciation of the words "women" and "business." By the further aid of historical study we are enabled to reduce all regular strong verbs to seven classes, represented by the conjugation of "drive," "choose," "drink," "bear," "give," "shake," and "fall," each following in its principal parts the strictest laws of ablaut or gradation. A yet mightier force in English accident than either umlaut or ablaut is the great law of group-influence or analogy. By this law, minorities tend to pass over to the side of majorities. Under its influence five plural endings for nouns in Anglo-Saxon have all conformed to the *s*-plurals; feminine nouns which formerly lacked *-es* in the genitive singular ending have all been affected by the analogy of masculines and neuter; and of the three hundred strong verbs in Anglo-Saxon more than two hundred have become weak.

Syntax, the study of the functions and relations of grammatical

forms, can be understood only in the light of its history. The artificial English sentence of today, the result of literary tradition and logical dictates, must be contrasted with the naïf Anglo-Saxon structure, which follows much more closely the drift of mental images, and therefore lacks unity and proportion. For more concrete illustration, I apply the historical method to a few familiar constructions of our present speech. "It is I" is the exact reverse of the old English "I am it" (*"Ic hit eom"*), which finds its parallel in the Modern High German *Ich bin es*. The old phrase persisted until after the time of Chaucer, who writes "It am nat I," and yielded to the modern expression sometime in the fifteenth century. Our absolute participle in such phrases as "all things considered" may be traced to the Anglo-Saxon dative absolute, which, though doubtless fostered by Latin influence, has a very primitive origin. In Middle English, the inflexion having decayed, the dative was mistaken for the nominative and the new phrase became much more popular than the Old English construction had ever been. Our present infinitive has its source, not in the simple infinitive of the older periods of the language which was then felt to be a noun, but in the gerundial infinitive, which, in its form ("to" + dative) and its function of purpose corresponds exactly to the Latin gerund. This construction of early date went on gaining ground from century to century, until the simple infinitive, save in a few cases, was replaced. These specific instances are perhaps sufficient to stress the very real relation existing between our early and our later forms.

I come now to the third division of my paper. The historical study of language is essential not only to an adequate understanding of the life of the past and of the speech of the present, but to an intelligent and thorough appreciation of the literature of any period. Every work of genius should be approached through the medium of the idiom, as well as of the life and thought, of its time—indeed, a comprehension of form conditions our insight into the things of the spirit. The letter saveth far more often than it killeth.

It would be useless to deny that literature of the highest is often subordinated to philology in the lowest sense of the term; that sometimes when the poet is at heaven's gates with the lark, the commentator, vexing himself over the ant-hills of laborious criticism, seems

totally deaf to the song. Mr. Churton Collins seems abundantly justified in the scornful tirade of his *Ephemeræ Critica* against the editors of the Clarendon Press *Hamlet*, when he points out in fierce protest that

the volume contains 117 pages of Shakspeare's text printed in large type, and 121 pages of notes in very small type; that, in this stupendous mass of exegesis and illustration there is, with the exception of one short passage, literally not a line about the play as a work of art, not a line about its structure and architecture, about its style, about its relations to æsthetic, about its metaphysic, its ethic, about the character of Hamlet, or about the character of any other person who figures in the drama.

If the etymology of "enginer," "petar," and "Polacks" be of vastly greater concern to the critic than the madness of Hamlet and the death of Ophelia, it were better that he busy himself with minor verse, where subtle philosophy and suggestive poetry make no distracting appeal—with Heywood and Shirley rather than with Shakespeare, with Occleve and Lydgate rather than with Chaucer.

Until very recently Shakespeare's plays have been printed in a modernized text, which has been mistakenly interpreted in the false light of present-day vocabulary and idiom. The consequence of this error is the large number of apparent depravities of the text and obscurities of diction, which remain to puzzle the modern reader. In an interesting article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1898, Mr. Mark Liddell says incisively:

The amount of good printers' ink that has been wasted in tortuous discussions of Shakspeare's text, where the text was perfectly clear to Elizabethan ears, would have been far better used if employed to disseminate a knowledge of Shakspeare's idiom and its historical development. The cumbrous apparatus of annotation and glossary could then be dispensed with, and the poet would speak to us simply and directly without the need of an interpreter.

Let us now approach the English of Shakespeare under the stimulus of the new scientific method, which enjoins us to study closely the historical development of the vocabulary and grammar of our language. Hazy notions of the poet's thought disappear as soon as we become aware of the "transference of meaning,"<sup>1</sup> which differentiates our word-symbols from those of the Elizabethan time. This transference is of several kinds. Words now used metaphorically

<sup>1</sup> *Words and their Ways*, etc., chap. 19.

were employed in their literal sense by Shakespeare. By reference to Abbott's *Grammar* we find that "exorbitant" was "out of the path," "uncommon;" "extravagant" ("the extravagant and erring spirit," *Hamlet*, I, i, 154), meant simply "wandering;" and "aggravate," "increase." Then, too, adjectives and verbs were often used actively, when the modern meaning is passive, or vice versa. "Hath fear'd the valiant" (*The Merchant of Venice*, II, i, 9), meant "hath caused the valiant to fear;" "feeling sorrows" meant "sorrows that are deeply felt," and the "unexpressive she," the "inexpressible lady." A word was sometimes far stronger than at present. In *Much Ado*, V, i, 306, the villain, Borachio, is called "naughty man;" and Gloster (*King Lear*, III, vii, 37), when the cruel Regan plucks his beard, addresses her as "naughty lady." Sometimes the meaning was weaker than now. In *The Merchant of Venice*, III, iv, 7, two men-friends are called "lovers." Often an entirely different idea was conveyed: "opinion" meant "reputation;" "remorse," "pity;" "cheer," "countenance;" "fond," "foolish;" "respective," "mindful." In such a phrase as, "Let not my jealousies be your dishonors, But mine owne safeties" (*Macbeth*, IV, iii, 29), Mr. Liddell notes<sup>1</sup> that we have a sharp, clear, and idiomatically expressed notion, "Let not my suspicions be a cause of shame to you, but a safeguard to myself." In these and a hundred other cases, all obstacles that oppose our way to the thought of the poet vanish before an historical knowledge of the Tudor vocabulary.

Not in words only, but in sounds, in inflections, and in collocations we mark "a continuous process of transformation, sometimes rapid, sometimes slow, the net result of which is that the idiom of one period fails to express for a succeeding generation its original content and meaning." How far we should miss the humor of Falstaff's word-play (*I Henry IV*, ii. 4, 221), "If reasons were as plenty as blackberries, I would give no man a reason upon compulsion, I," did we not know that the old pronunciation was that of "raisins!" What meaning should we gather from Sir Toby's suggestion of a challenge taunt (*Twelfth Night*, III, ii, 47), "If thou thou'st him some thrice, it shall not be amiss," unless we were able to appreciate the exact shades of superiority, familiarity, or contempt betokened by

<sup>1</sup> *Elizabethan Shakspeare*, p. xi.

the use of the second person singular pronoun in Elizabethan conversation? Only a knowledge of the old distinction between infinitive and gerund can show us that the speech of the Messenger in *Macbeth* (IV, ii. 70), "To fright you thus, methinks I am too savage," does not mean, "I am too savage to fright you," but, "*in* or *for* frightening you." And so in the case of Shakespeare's use of the double comparative and superlative ("More better", "most unkindest"), of the Northern present indicative plural in -s, of the double negative, of the old neuter possessive, the most superficial acquaintance with the idiom of his day will save us from being caught, as so many are, in the thorny thickets of seeming irregularities of syntax.

The service of philology to our oldest literature is greater still. It has made possible appreciative study of the poetry of the *Beowulf* and of the prose of King Ælfred; it has discovered the analogues of ballads and the sources of romances; it has traced by careful dialect study the relations between the several cycles of mediæval miracle-plays; it has enabled us to enter with fresh understanding and sympathy the wonderful world of Chaucer's verse. All this it has done, and more. Carping critics to the contrary, the science of language has a very real connection with literature. The historical study of our speech is the shortest and surest road to a critical understanding of our noblest thought.

In a word or two of summary I apply my text. As an intimate knowledge of the life of the past, an intelligent comprehension of the language of the present, and a sympathetic appreciation of the literature of both the past and present should mark the man of culture, the study of the history of English should surely not be deemed esoteric specialism, and be confined to graduate schools and to the higher classes of colleges. Not directly through formal courses, but through adequate linguistic training of the teacher, the science should enter our secondary schools, and there pervade all grammatical instruction. It is not only meet and right, but your bounden duty, to "look unto the rock whence ye are hewn and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged."

## DISCUSSION

SUPERINTENDENT ALBERT W. VARNEY, Bennington, Vt.: The study of philology has been confined to the elective courses of colleges. To introduce it formally into secondary schools would be the beginning of a large undertaking, viz: to fit for all the college electives. A few secondary schools have introduced it. Boston in the fourth year, and in the second year Rogers School for girls, which fits for Smith, have courses in Old English; in some western states the state university gives credits for entrance for work in Anglo-Saxon; but in general, secondary schools do not teach the history of the English language. The pressure is already too great, and more subjects cannot be introduced. Teachers of English are not fitted for the work; yet the subject has its place, and is of unquestioned value, and should receive attention; but for the present it must be a part of the general subject of English. It might be introduced even in the grade work in connection with technical grammar, making many forms and peculiarities of our language much clearer. And in the high school, taken as auxiliary work, it would be of great value. All teachers should prepare themselves for this work, though at present the introduction of the study of the history of the English language as a separate and formal subject seems impossible.